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ICYMI

Catching Up to the Moving
Image Online*Gregory Zinman*

Online video has reached escape velocity: at present, video traffic accounts for over three-quarters of U.S. internet bandwidth; YouTube counts over one billion people as users; and three hundred hours of new video are uploaded to YouTube every minute—only three years ago, it was only 60 hours per minute (Boris 2014). The figure will be higher by the time you read this. Now, more than ever, there is quite literally too much to see.

Digital humanities have long been concerned with issues of scale, but, save for some important exceptions (Burgess & Green 2009; Snickars & Vonderau 2009), scholars have yet to fully contend with a medium—online video—that commands an attention to scale as one of its fundamental characteristics. Nevertheless, the *experience* of online video is nearly always one of overabundance and, concomitantly, loss. ICYMI, the acronym for the internet/txt slang “in case you missed it,” may thus be the defining *impression* of online video. Relentlessly hashtagged and reposted, ICYMI points out noteworthy videos you may not have seen. The shorthand’s putatively helpful tone papers over an individual’s proliferating anxiety as she attempts to stay *au courant* with all of the “essential” memes, GIFs, trailers, soundbites, vines, and vids marked as such. Save for live-streaming video of press conferences or webcam shows, catching up to the past—whether from the last century or only a few minutes ago—is online video’s fundamental mode of viewership. In a content-heavy mediascape in which web pages are constantly updated and browsers are incessantly refreshed, media gets buried. One of the only chances for a video’s survival within the attention economy is if it is taken up in the ecology of social media: reblogged, re-tweeted, posted, and shared. A close cousin to that other internet-inspired self-diagnosis, FOMO (“fear of missing out”), ICYMI speaks to the impossibility of keeping up. The resulting discomfort is produced by the notion that *not* seeing the video takes one out of the circulation of information—to have not seen means to not participate, to not comment, to not register within a designated community.

Regardless of what one thinks is “worth watching,” the staggering scope and potential of online video—what Richard Grusin has dubbed “the YouTube sublime” (2009: 60)—has forestalled a significant academic bibliography on the subject, even as those concerning social networks and computational media have swelled in recent years. Considering the subject’s

quickly changing terrain, which pulses at a speed well beyond that of conventional academic publishing, the dearth of scholarship is understandable. Online video's expanding reach presents a further challenge. Just think: the moving image online encompasses not only streaming cinema and television content from services such as Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu, but also video platforms such as YouTube, Vimeo, and DailyMotion; micro moving image platforms such as Vine; social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram; as well as live streaming, interactive platforms such as Skype, Google Hangout, FaceTime, and Periscope—not to mention the host of ever-proliferating sites and platforms for watching pornographic video. Video online therefore encompasses nearly every imaginable instantiation of the moving image, and the tendency toward the production of more content, increased viewership, and bigger business seems both inevitable and irrevocable. Online video is a locus of culture and capital, and it is therefore incumbent upon us, as media scholars and students of same, to think hard about its technologies, methods, and meanings.

How, then, do we approach the study of the moving image online? How do we catch up to our video present? How much of online video deserves scrutiny beyond its obvious ephemeral pleasures? When we think of the moving image, we tend to think first of film and television. Perhaps not surprisingly, a number of conceptual rubrics associated with cinema and media studies can be applied to an analysis of the moving image online. When our focus shifts from traditional film and television to the moving image online, we have an opportunity to expand the parameters of screen studies by revealing continuities and ruptures between newer and older forms of media.

One key difference between online video and earlier varieties of the moving image is the position and role of the viewer, particularly with regard to the idea of labor. In a visual field where videos come to us and we reach out to find others with a search bar or simple click, the ease of access and manipulation of the visual image has resulted in an effacement of labor. YouTube, Google, and Facebook employ thousands of workers whose responsibilities include screening and removing new uploads that depict beheadings, torture, child pornography, bestiality, and animal abuse. Many of these workers do not make it past a few months on the job, and there is now more content than can be effectively screened by humans (Chen 2014). Online video gives us a chance to think about digital labor through the material and affective economics that are put into play with every keystroke and followed link.

There are numerous conceivable approaches to the subject of online video, so this chapter sets out a small series of conceptual lenses—Content, Viewing, and Genre—through which we can begin to see the online moving image as a technology, artistic medium, economy, and social structure. My focus largely centers on YouTube, not only because it is the largest repository of online video, but also because it stands as the third most trafficked website on the internet (Alexa 2015), behind Facebook and Google—the latter owns YouTube, and the former makes extensive use of its resources. YouTube is hardly the only place where people are watching video, but it is a major hub of video culture—the site where the moving image is being liked, shared, aggregated, quantified, and reshaped.

Content

ICYMI: The most watched online video of 2014 was a piece of grassroots filmmaking by Polish YouTuber, Sylwester Wardega, aka SA Wardega. Wardega dressed up his small dog, Chica, in a tarantula costume and filmed people's terrified reactions when confronted by the comically uncanny animal in a subway station, in a dimly lit park, or while stepping into a

parking garage elevator (Luckerson 2014). More than 125 million people watched “Mutant Giant Spider Dog,” and its success encapsulates many features of contemporary online video. For one, animals, particularly cats and dogs, enjoy a place of privilege in online video—a digital mainstreaming of the myriad appearances by pets in avant-garde films by Chris Marker, Maya Deren, Andy Warhol, Kenneth Anger, and Carolee Schneemann, among others. Wardega’s video is also short, running roughly three and a half minutes, making it perfect for a bit of procrastination from whatever task is at hand, for waiting out a long coffee line on a mobile phone, or for breaking up a scroll through one’s social media feed. It carries the documentary impulse that defines a swath of online amateur filmmaking while conflating the real and imaginary. It is user-generated in terms of content, viral in its success and spread, and global in its reach, supported by Wardega’s dedicated Facebook and YouTube profiles, not to mention a number of fansites and ancillary pages (Chica, it should be noted, has her own Facebook profile). As slight as it may be, the success of “Mutant Giant Spider Dog,” at first glance, seemingly encapsulates the promise of online video as a participatory and democratic medium, as expressed by scholars such as Henry Jenkins (2006), Clay Shirky (2008), and Sam Ford and Josh Green (2013), in which barriers to production, distribution, and fame have been lowered to the point that ostensibly anyone can make a video that can compete on the media playing field with content by any professional filmmaker or company. At the same time, however, more sustained economic critiques of digital culture have begun to emerge. Most notably, Christian Fuchs (2012) argues that internet platforms such as YouTube cannot be considered participatory if the ownership structure is not in fact participatory, and Alexandra Juhasz’s video-book, *Learning From YouTube* (2011), points to the many ways YouTube’s design primarily functions as means of digression and distraction from deep critical engagement of any kind. By corporate intention and through user experience, individuals are left out of the negotiations, decisions, and strategy of video sharing sites, all while signing away personal data that can be used by industrial authorities to shape exactly those business decisions. Jonathan Beller (2006) suggests that in the economy of the internet, attention is the most significant indicator of value, with the result being that “to look is to labor” (115). Online viewers thus find themselves simultaneously assuming the roles of consumer, laborer, and commodity.

Tellingly, the second most watched online video of 2014 was an ad—the very thing viewers hope to avoid (or at least claim to) by watching content online, and a potent example of how capital has staked a significant claim on the moving image online. In “Winner Stays,” a 4-minute advertisement for Nike’s “Risk Everything” campaign, shot by the agency Wieden + Kennedy, school-aged participants in a pickup game of soccer miraculously transform themselves into some of the world’s greatest professional players. As the scene shifts from the schoolyard to a flashbulb-popping, 50,000-seat arena, the camera cuts from the fevered pitch to fans cheering on the action as they watch the game broadcast on televisions in bars and cafes around the world. The players sport signature Nike cleats, while in the stands, NBA star Kobe Bryant and *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit model Irina Shayk lend credence to the machismo-laden one-upmanship on display below. Meanwhile, one of the children metamorphoses into the Incredible Hulk before further transforming, strangely, into Team USA’s goalkeeper, Tim Howard. The short ends with a call for participation via social media, replete with a hashtag: #riskanything.

What was implicit in the production of “Mutant Giant Spider Dog”—that fame and fortune can be achieved by anyone, anywhere—is made explicit in the Nike video. Amateurs become professionals with transmedial potential, watched and adored by millions. At the same

time, the ad is a riot of cross-promotional branding, which ranges between the subtextual (e.g., Victoria's Secret by the association with Shayk and the NBA by association with Bryant); the literal (e.g., the "Fly Emirates" logo adorning the Paris Saint-Germain F.C. jersey of Zlatan Ibrahimović), and the absurd (e.g., the CGI apparition of Disney-owned Marvel's jade giant). This surreal bricolage of human and intellectual properties is emblematic of Francisco Casetti's formulation of the experience of online video: "We no longer find ourselves faced with an exchange, but a circulation; no longer in front of a merely factual reality, but a reality born of a recombination of information packets" (2015: 173). Nike offers a GIF-ready, pre-emptive remix, smashing together bodies and brands to pleasure and entice an eager, twinned audience: one that is staged in the commercial, and one ready to click through the same. Having so thoroughly mixed the real with computer-generated fantasy, "Winner Stays" concludes with a gesture toward the public, but serves ultimately as further promotion for the brands and celebrities at hand.

Made at opposite ends of the video production scale, with radically different levels of financial and technical support, these two videos nevertheless capture the still-developing and uneasy relationship between professional and amateur makers online. YouTube's slogan used to be "Broadcast Yourself," a populist motto celebrating grassroots self-expression. That initial euphoria has given way to a sober tagline that reflects the site's increased reliance on ad revenue and material that can hold viewers' attention in a crowded virtual marketplace: "Hosts user-generated videos. Includes network and professional content." The divide between amateur and professional is simultaneously blurring distinctions even as it generates insurmountable gaps. Of the 30 most watched YouTube videos since the site arrived online in 2005, only one of them—"Charlie Bit My Finger Again," a home-video of an infant chomping his older brother—was made by an individual rather than a corporation. 27 of the remaining 29 slots are filled by professionally budgeted and executed music videos (YouTube 2015).

This is the shifting nature of capital at work in online video. Jean Burgess states:

As YouTube, Inc. moves to more profitably arrange and stabilize the historically contentious relations among rights-holders, uploaders, advertisers and audiences, some forms of amateur video production have become institutionalized and professionalized, while others have been further marginalized and driven underground or to other, more forgiving, platforms.

(Burgess 2012: 53–54)

Of course, the majority of videos on YouTube receive fewer than 500 views, and amass even fewer subscribers (Frommer & Angelova 2009). Online video is not simply supported by the millions of hours of unpaid labor that go into creating and maintaining user-generated content, but, most important to the shareholders and businesspeople running the sites, it is increasingly supported by a hierarchical star-system—a firmament which now includes Wardega—responsible for generating ad revenue.

For all there is to see online, there is an equal or greater amount of moving image material that remains *offline*. What gets digitized and uploaded (and not subsequently taken down) depends on a complex negotiation of legal rights, costly preservation efforts, and business strategies, as well as the initiative of enterprising individuals willing to fly in the face of intellectual property claims. The resultant gaps in the online video record produce a surfeit of parallel, ghostly content—a forgotten history of the moving image comprised of marginalized, amateur, forgotten, and restricted work that will never make it to our screens.

Viewing

How we watch online video not only presents a problem of scale, it also presents a problem of diversity. Videos are consumed on desktop computers at work, on laptops, on tablets, on phones, on watches, and across façades and billboards of urban centers. This does not mean that all of these surfaces, screens, and displays hold viewers' attention equally. Each carries associations and conventions of use and is highly contextualized by the time and place in which it is engaged. Viewing conditions are situational and in perpetual flux: the single viewer of Facebook and Instagram engages online video differently from the couple settling down to stream a few episodes of *Game of Thrones*, or a preteen slumber party where individuals watch *The Lego Movie* on separate devices so that they can IM one another in real time as it plays. What is being watched where, how, and by whom is something that has not yet been extensively studied, and remains far from understood. Yet online video's now-familiar condition of one viewer, one screen, harkens back to some of the earliest moving image technology, such as Edison's Kinetoscope, which also had a small screen that could only be accessed by one viewer. More than a marker of mere convenience, this personalization of media consumption is less a recursion to past media conventions than a symptom of how both media experiences and communities have been made immaterial, the "weak ties" described by Nicole Ellison and danah boyd that "would fade away were it not for the ease with which people can communicate, share, and maintain simple connections" (2013: 159). Viewing online video thus produces a divided consciousness in which the user continuously toggles between personal interest and a global connection with myriad like-minded groups. To address these new viewing contexts, Tara McPherson has coined the term "volitional mobility" to describe the "scan-and-search" experience of viewing content online (2006: 205). The term implies agency and ability, a means of surveying an ever-expanding media horizon before drilling into a particular facet of the landscape. However, in addition to users seeking out and curating collections of videos online, more and more we find that online video comes to viewers.

Video comes to viewers in a number of different but interrelated ways. People see videos embedded in their social media streams on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr. Videos viewed on these platforms may even start automatically, momentarily pausing the user's infinite scrolling of updated content. Videos displayed within and transmitted by social media tend to be extremely short and are meant to register briefly. Still others are linked within posts or comments. One's "volitional mobility," her behaviors and choices online—or, what gets clicked and how long one lingers—comes back to her algorithmically. Your social media reacts to your choices. You are "fed" more of the kinds of things you have previously clicked on, and the same is true of sites such as YouTube, where your global searches serve, first and foremost, to hone the specificity and variety of the online video that comes to you. Your searches beget searches undertaken not by you, but by algorithms developed to keep you watching more, to sprinkle a trail of video breadcrumbs that are followed to various destinations. During an interview in 2014, YouTube spokesman Cristos Goodrow described the millions of lines of code comprising the platform's proprietary algorithm:

I don't think of it as one thing, I think of it as lots of little pieces that are trying to accomplish the overall goal of connecting you with what you're looking for or what we think you might want to watch.

(Kreft 2014)

A reason cited by many viewers who now claim to prefer watching content online to offline is that they feel free of programming, liberated from scheduled times and places of viewership (Battaglio 2015). Our behaviors and click-throughs imbricate us in what I call *algorithmic viewing*, a kind of subtle and individually tailored programming that users may not be fully aware of (“what we think you might want to watch”) or even care about. Echoing Wendy Chun’s theorization of how computational environments pose the problem of not only what is not known but also what cannot be perceived phenomenologically, the processing rate of algorithms exceeds people’s knowledge capacity *and* perception (2011: 1–18).

Algorithmic viewing also applies to the increasing numbers of nonhuman watchers of online video. YouTube employs automated copyright violation detection, so that rights holders can be alerted to others using their content without permission, and geofiltering software to restrict access to content depending on viewers’ locations. Bots designed to watch and ratchet up YouTube views became so widespread that, in 2012, YouTube changed its proprietary algorithm to reflect not the number of times a video was watched, but the amount of time spent watching specific videos. Advances in computer vision have trained robots to watch cooking tutorials on YouTube and recognize objects (e.g., apples and wire whisks) as well as cooking techniques in videos. It is not impossible to imagine online viewing as both a template for machine learning and a site for combinatory expressions of computer and human vision resulting in new modes of the moving image.

Computer vision may allow for comprehensive viewing of online video by nonhuman agents, but there are also heaps of material that go unseen by human viewers. Roughly 30 percent of videos on YouTube account for 99 percent of what is actually watched on the platform (Whitelaw 2011). The vast majority of the online video repository simply gets swept away in the wake of online video’s big whales. Regardless of who is or is not watching, it is worth asking what is ultimately more valuable to Google: the content uploaded to YouTube by people, or the computer vision harvesting, processing, and analyzing its metadata. Indeed, accounting for who or what is viewing online video is just one way that media scholars can begin to conceptualize the changing nature of viewing in the digital age.

Genre

As heterogeneous as online video content and viewing may be, certain generic tendencies have emerged. While related to conventions associated with film and television, these tendencies nevertheless establish new vistas for the moving image.

For instance, online video has given rise to certain new classifications of moving image practice. Compiled tropes are the visual lingua franca of today’s viral videos. Meme-based “supercuts” are now staples of online video production and consumption. Like a web-based instantiation of Lev Manovich’s (2000) database cinema, they collect a repeated action, bit of dialogue, or composition from a single film, television show, or genre (think of every instance of Chewbacca roaring in the *Star Wars* films, sequences of tough guys walking away from explosions in slow motion, or scenes of Tom Cruise running). Found-footage practices that were once the province of the filmic avant-garde (e.g., Bruce Connor’s *A Movie* (1958)) have become the way video is made, disseminated, and understood online.

When online video is relegated to the realm of pleasant diversion, how it hails viewers or deploys questionable choices often goes unacknowledged or unchallenged. In exploring the intersections of laughter with the ethics and practices of remix culture, Jaimie Baron (2014) identifies a tendency that she calls “(in)appropriation,” or the foregrounding of disparity between source material and its repurposing. Baron’s research points to the necessity of

interrogating remix culture and its negotiations with not only public and private domains, but also issues of race, class, gender, and power.

Remix is hardly the only wellspring for new genres, however. *Machinima*, in which users employ real-time 3-D graphic engines to create new computer animations, is wildly popular and demonstrates the shrinking gaps between animation, videogame cut scenes, and traditional cinema. It also serves as a promotional tool for existing games or even visual archives of obsolete ones. Relatedly, but even more widespread, is *Let's Play*: video that demonstrates videogame playthrough, usually accompanied by a gamer's running commentary. Swedish gamer PewDiePie (né Felix Kjellberg) is the reigning champion of the genre; the 56 million people who have signed up to follow his virtual exploits makes his the most subscribed channel in all of YouTube (Guinness World Records 2015). *Tutorials*, in which on-camera personalities offer tips on the mechanics of hairstyling, makeup, plumbing, circuit-bending, sweep-picking guitar techniques, and so on, also indicate a shift from a text-based culture to a moving-image one. The widespread popularity of particular tutors, such as makeup demonstrator Michelle Phan, indicates how what was once the province of the how-to book or dreary instructional film has become a launching point for transmedial branding. *Unboxing*, or videos in which recent purchasers of commercial goods both film and narrate their experiences of taking things they bought out of the original packaging, speaks to the simultaneous commodity fetishism and documentary impulse that inform a great deal of online video. In these object-oriented strip teases for eager consumers, viewers can see if the purchase comes as advertised while marveling at the sight of a device emerging from its glossy packaging. At the same time, unboxing videos and examples of its related genre, "haul" videos—the visual cataloging of multiple purchases—act as unpaid advertising, and thus labor, for the brands and products on display. For instance, five days after the release of the iPhone 6S, nearly 300,000 unboxing videos featuring the device appeared on YouTube.

Online video is changing and repositioning the use and understanding of the moving image within the digital mediascape. To the suggested directions for further investigation laid out above, we might add others: how online video has influenced the notion of celebrity, the varieties of collective and individual affect engendered by online video, the question of digital video preservation, how online video complicates notions of temporality in the moving image, the study of marginalized networks and alternative viewing platforms, and the efficacy and reach of social justice movements in online video. Several recent projects highlight the possibilities of using online video as a method of conducting innovative scholarship in the humanities, from Matthias Stork's (2011) video essays on "chaos cinema" to my own website dedicated to handmade cinema (2012) to Virginia Kuhn's use of computer vision for large-scale analysis of images (see Chapter 30, this volume). In other words, online video affords us the opportunity to formulate new histories and theories of the moving image and, in doing so, expand the boundaries of humanistic inquiry. ICYMI: the field of online video is ready—if not necessarily waiting.

Further Reading

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